Nixon aides blamed Woods for gap in tape

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WASHINGTON (AP) – Richard Nixon's White House lawyers secretly told a judge that Nixon's secretary Rose Mary Woods caused the 18½-minute gap in a crucial tape recording, and did it intentionally, a newly disclosed Watergate document asserts.

"There is no 'innocent explanation' of the gap or erasure," the document quotes the lawyers as telling federal Judge John Sirica.

The claim, alleging destruction of critical evidence, is contained in a legal memo among 35,500 pages of Miss Woods' White House files made public Thursday by the National Archives. Miss Woods, now 77, has always denied being the culprit. She was never charged with any wrongdoing.

Repeated efforts to reach Miss Woods Thursday night were unsuccessful. A woman who answered the phone at Miss Woods' listed number in Alliance, Ohio, said she was not there and did not know where she was.

The erased tape carried part of a conversation between Nixon and his chief of staff, H.R. Haldeman, three days after the June 17, 1972, break-in at Democratic headquarters in the Watergate office complex.

Three times the attorneys, ostensibly representing Miss Woods' interests as well as Nixon's, "secretly entered her office in her absence searching for proof to support their felony charges," the newly released document says.

It is headed "Memorandum to Research Staff" and dated Jan. 10, 1974. It appears to have been prepared by Miss Woods' lawyer, Charles Rhyne, now retired, or his

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assistants. But it carries no letterhead or signature.

Mr. Rhyne became her attorney after White House lawyers Leonard Garment and the late Fred Buzhardt made their accusation without informing her and, on the following day, advised her "that she should secure another attorney," the memo said.